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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000404

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SUBJECT: KUWAITIS SPECULATE ABOUT OUTCOME OF IRAQI
ELECTIONS BUT THIRD LOCAL SHOOT-OUT TAKES MEDIA CENTER-STAGE

REF: KUWAIT 0036

Classified By: DCM Matthew Tueller for reason 1.4 (d)

1. (C) Summary and Comment: A third gun battle between militants and Kuwaiti law enforcement officials stole the January 30 media spotlight from what was genuine and growing interest in Iraq's elections. Nonetheless, many Kuwaitis, while hopeful for successful elections in Iraq, are concerned that their failure could lead to more unrest, terror, and possibly an Iraqi civil war. Kuwait's Islamists, although equally hopeful, are leery of a Shi'a dominant Iraqi National Assembly which they believe could marginalize Iraqi Sunnis and possibly politically empower Kuwaiti Shi'a by exerting influence on the GOK to raise local Shi'a political concerns. While some would have preferred to see elections postponed until there was a curb in the violence, the desire to see a stable and prosperous Iraq is almost universal. There is likely to be a fringe element that distrusts the electoral process because of U.S. and Coalition involvement, but most understand that Kuwait will be among the first beneficiaries of a stable and democratic Iraq. End Summary and Comment.

Praise for the Effort...

2. (U) The media's coverage of election day in Iraq has been completely drowned out by a third shoot-out between police and militants in Kuwait City. In the recent run-up to the elections, however, many Kuwaitis have been actively watching and speculating on the electoral developments in Iraq. Kuwaitis, officially and unofficially, are hopeful for success but remain concerned about the growing power of any future Iraqi government. Because of the ever-present memory of the 1990 Iraqi invasion, most are ultimately more concerned about having an Iraq that lives in peace with its neighbors than who will win more seats in the parliamentary elections.

- Advisor to PM Shaykh Sabah, Sami Al-Nisf said it is irrelevant who wins as long as democracy and pluralism prevail.

- Shi'a professor and women's rights activist Dr. Maasouma Al-Mubarak praised the election calling it the birth of a new democratic Iraq for the first time in history.

- Liberal Kuwait University professor of political science Shamlan Al-Issa called the process the most "dangerous and strange democratic elections in the world." While he supports the election process and expects the Shi'a to become the political majority, he raised questions about the democratic nature of the elections because no clear-cut platforms have been presented and most Iraqis don't even know the names of the candidates.

... But Fearing the Result

3. (U) The prospect of a Shi'a-majority government in Baghdad worries some Kuwaitis, particularly Sunni Islamists. Some believe that Iranians are trying to influence the outcome of the elections --- there has been speculation that Iranians are attempting to buy Iraqi ration cards because these serve as a valid document for voter registration. Much of this concern stems from a fear that Kuwaiti Shi'a will become more politically empowered should a Baghdad government be dominated by Iraqi Shi'a and that Iran will hold more sway in the region. Another element is that some Islamists believe that Iraqi Sunnis make up far more of Iraq's population than currently estimated -- some believe Sunnis are in the majority in Iraq -- and do not trust that elections will be free and fair if Sunnis end up in the extreme minority. (Note: One third of Kuwaitis are Shi'a. While underrepresented in official GOK positions, they are an accepted minority in Kuwaiti society where some of the top business and military leaders are Shi'a. There are 5 Shi'a MPs in the 50-member National Assembly and the only Shi'a Minister, Information Minister Mohammed Abulhassan recently resigned from his post (reftel). End note.) PM Shaykh Sabah reportedly recently stressed the Kuwaiti Shi'a are "sons of Kuwait," and not of Iraq or Iran.

- Former Oil minister and liberal Ali Al-Baghli said Kuwaitis are worried about the elections fearing that if not successful, civil war and terrorism could spread and affect the security and stability of Kuwait.

- Hard-line Salafi Movement MP Dr. Walid Al-Tabtabaei expressed concern that Iraq's Sunni voters would be marginalized during the election to the benefit of the Shi'a.

14. (U) Baghdad minimize considered.

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